

## Historical Papers Communications historiques



# The Catholic Church in the Italian Empire, 1936-1938

Peter C. Kent

Volume 19, numéro 1, 1984

Guelph 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030921ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030921ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Kent, P. C. (1984). The Catholic Church in the Italian Empire, 1936-1938. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 19(1), 138-150. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030921ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Les accords du Lateran de 1929 inaugurèrent une période d'étroite collaboration entre l'Eglise catholique romaine et l'Etat italien sous Mussolini. Cependant la politique italienne en Abyssinie, après la conquête de ce pays en 1936, exacerba les tensions qui avaient résulté à la fois des politiques intérieures et de l'appui de l'Italie aux activités antireligieuses en Allemagne. Cet exposé traite de l'évolution de la politique italienne en Abyssinie et du désenchantement graduel de l'Eglise face aux résultats de ces accords.

En matière d'affaires intérieures, l'ère du Vatican portait sur le manifeste du gouvernement Mussolini (1938) sur la pureté de la race, et sur la législation antisémite qui en découla. La hiérarchie ecclésiastique d'Italie avait présumé que son appui à l'intervention italienne en Afrique entraînerait l'adoption, par le gouvernement, d'une politique de christianisation. Pour maintenir une certaine stabilité intérieure, le gouvernement choisit de suivre une stratégie de tolérance religieuse, d'ailleurs défendue par le ministère de la colonisation. Cette approche aliéna le Saint-siège qui, contrairement à la hiérarchie italienne, n'avait jamais été en faveur d'une guerre impériale. Cette politique de tolérance était contraire aux plans de l'Eglise pour la conversion au catholicisme de ce territoire, et gênait ses activités missionnaires. Les musulmans étaient particulièrement favorisés car, de l'avis du ministère de la colonisation, leur appui était essentiel au maintien du contrôle impérial. On croyait également que cette coopération aiderait les Italiens dans leurs relations avec d'autres puissances islamiques du Moyen-orient.

Il n'y a pas que l'Eglise qui s'opposait aux actions du ministère de la colonisation; le ministère des affaires étrangères croyait qu'on devait utiliser l'Eglise comme instrument de l'expansion italienne. Cependant, la position du ministère de la colonisation prévalut. Peu importe leur religion, les missionnaires qui s'opposaient aux désirs de l'Italie pour la nouvelle colonie étaient punis. Lorsque les affaires extérieures tentèrent d'intervenir en faveur des missionnaires britanniques, Mussolini appuya la politique du ministère de la colonisation, et même l'élargit; désormais, aucun étranger ne pouvait enseigner dans l'Empire. Le ministère de la colonisation consolida son emprise, ordonnant au Saint-siège de remplacer les missionnaires catholiques Français par des Italiens. Réagissant, le Vatican créa une commission pontificale qui, en dernière analyse, se plia à la plupart des exigences du ministère. Sur les questions litigieuses, le ministère demeurait inébranlable; le Pape envoya alors en Abyssinie un visiteur apostolique qui, il l'espérait, améliorerait la position de l'Eglise. Finalement, le ministère de la colonisation accéda à la demande de l'Eglise pour la création d'une hiérarchie ecclésiastique distincte pour la colonie; peu après, l'Eglise reconnut Victor Emmanuel comme empereur d'Abyssinie.

Cependant, malgré cette entente, la politique de tolérance de l'Etat Italien avait causé des dommages irréparables à la coopération entre ce dernier et l'Eglise catholique romaine. L'hostilité du gouvernement face aux prétentions de l'Eglise au sein de l'Empire constituent un fondement essentiel de l'attaque du Pape sur la politique raciale italienne de 1938.

# The Catholic Church in the Italian Empire, 1936-38

PETER C. KENT

## Résumé

*The Lateran Agreements of 1929 initiated a period of close cooperation between the Roman Catholic church and the Italian state under Mussolini. Italian policy in Abyssinia after the conquest of that country in 1936, however, exacerbated tensions which had developed as a result of both Italian domestic policies and support for Germany's antichurch activities. This paper explores the development of Italian policy in Abyssinia and the church's gradual disenchantment with the results of their entente.*

*In domestic affairs, the Vatican's anger focused on the Mussolini government's 1938 manifesto on racial purity and the resulting anti-Semitic legislation. The church hierarchy within Italy had assumed that their support for Italian intervention in Africa would result in the government's adoption of a policy of Christianization. To maintain a measure of internal stability within the country, the government chose to follow a strategy, advocated by the colonial ministry, of religious toleration. This approach alienated the Holy See which, unlike the Italian hierarchy, had never been in favour of an imperialistic war. The policy of toleration ran contrary to the church's catholicizing plans for the territory, and interfered with its missionary activities. Particularly favoured were the Moslems, whose support, in the view of the colonial ministry, was crucial to imperial control. In turn, this cooperation would, it was felt, help the Italians in their relations with other Islamic powers in the Middle East.*

*Opposition to the colonial office's actions was not limited to the church; the foreign ministry believed that the church should be used as an agency in Italian expansion. The colonial ministry, however, prevailed. Whenever missionaries of any religion opposed Italian wishes in the new colony, they were punished. When the foreign ministry attempted to intervene on behalf of British missionaries, Mussolini supported the colonial office policy, and even extended it; henceforth, no foreigner could teach in the Empire. The colonial ministry consolidated its control, ordering the Holy See to replace French Catholic missionaries with Italians. In response, the Vatican appointed a pontifical commission, which ultimately bowed to most of the ministry's demands. On disputed points the ministry remained adamant; the Pope then sent an Apostolic Visitor to Abyssinia to negotiate a settlement which, he hoped, would enhance the place of the church. Finally, the colonial ministry acceded to the church's request for the creation of a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy for the colony; the church shortly after recognized Victor Emmanuel as emperor of Abyssinia.*

*In spite of this agreement, however, the cooperation between the Roman Catholic church and the Italian state was irreparably damaged by the latter's toleration policy. Government hostility to the pretensions of the church within the Empire forms an essential backdrop to the Pope's attack, in 1938, on Italian racial policy.*

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

*Les accords du Lateran de 1929 inaugurèrent une période d'étroite collaboration entre l'Eglise catholique romaine et l'Etat italien sous Mussolini. Cependant la politique italienne en Abyssinie, après la conquête de ce pays en 1936, exacerba les tensions qui avaient résulté à la fois des politiques intérieures et de l'appui de l'Italie aux activités antireligieuses en Allemagne. Cet exposé traite de l'évolution de la politique italienne en Abyssinie et du désenchantement graduel de l'Eglise face aux résultats de ces accords.*

*En matière d'affaires intérieures, l'ère du Vatican portait sur le manifeste du gouvernement Mussolini (1938) sur la pureté de la race, et sur la législation antisémite qui en découla. La hiérarchie ecclésiastique d'Italie avait présumé que son appui à l'intervention italienne en Afrique entraînerait l'adoption, par le gouvernement, d'une politique de christianisation. Pour maintenir une certaine stabilité intérieure, le gouvernement choisit de suivre une stratégie de tolérance religieuse, d'ailleurs défendue par le ministère de la colonisation. Cette approche aliéna le Saint-siège qui, contrairement à la hiérarchie italienne, n'avait jamais été en faveur d'une guerre impériale. Cette politique de tolérance était contraire aux plans de l'Eglise pour la conversion au catholicisme de ce territoire, et gênait ses activités missionnaires. Les musulmans étaient particulièrement favorisés car, de l'avis du ministère de la colonisation, leur appui était essentiel au maintien du contrôle impérial. On croyait également que cette coopération aiderait les Italiens dans leurs relations avec d'autres puissances islamiques du Moyen-orient.*

*Il n'y a pas que l'Eglise qui s'opposait aux actions du ministère de la colonisation; le ministère des affaires étrangères croyait qu'on devait utiliser l'Eglise comme instrument de l'expansion italienne. Cependant, la position du ministère de la colonisation prévalut. Peu importe leur religion, les missionnaires qui s'opposaient aux désirs de l'Italie pour la nouvelle colonie étaient punis. Lorsque les affaires extérieures tentèrent d'intervenir en faveur des missionnaires britanniques, Mussolini appuya la politique du ministère de la colonisation, et même l'élargit; désormais, aucun étranger ne pouvait enseigner dans l'Empire. Le ministère de la colonisation consolida son emprise, ordonnant au Saint-siège de remplacer les missionnaires catholiques Français par des Italiens. Réagissant, le Vatican créa une commission pontificale qui, en dernière analyse, se plia à la plupart des exigences du ministère. Sur les questions litigieuses, le ministère demeurait inébranlable; le Pape envoya alors en Abyssinie un visiteur apostolique qui, il l'espérait, améliorerait la position de l'Eglise. Finalement, le ministère de la colonisation accéda à la demande de l'Eglise pour la création d'une hiérarchie ecclésiastique distincte pour la colonie; peu après, l'Eglise reconnut Victor Emmanuel comme empereur d'Abyssinie.*

*Cependant, malgré cette entente, la politique de tolérance de l'Etat Italien avait causé des dommages irréparables à la coopération entre ce dernier et l'Eglise catholique romaine. L'hostilité du gouvernement face aux prétentions de l'Eglise au sein de l'Empire constituent un fondement essentiel de l'attaque du Pape sur la politique raciale italienne de 1938.*

The Lateran Agreements of 1929 opened a period of close cooperation between the

Catholic church and the Fascist state in Italy, with the church providing one of the institutional props for what Renzo De Felice has characterized as Mussolini's "years of consensus" between 1929 and 1936.<sup>1</sup> This cooperation culminated in the active support given by that church in the Italian war against Abyssinia between 1935 and 1936. The conclusion of the Abyssinian war did not, however, lead to continued cooperation and collaboration as had earlier been suggested by D.A. Binchy's *Church and State in Fascist Italy* (1941). Instead, the years between 1936 and 1938 were marked by a decided falling out between church and state. Two factors were primarily responsible.

One was the developing affinity between Hitler and Mussolini in the context of the Rome-Berlin Axis. While the Holy See had concluded a Concordat with Hitler in 1933, the Nazi regime had violated its provisions almost before the ink was dry and the Catholic church in Germany had suffered a continuous series of persecutions under Nazi rule. As Mussolini drew closer to Hitler through their cooperation in the Spanish civil war, the pope lost no opportunity to denounce the Nazi regime and to try to turn the Italian people against Germany. He particularly feared that the influence of Hitler might lead Mussolini to emulate the Nazi persecution of the church and thus to undermine the favored position of the church in Italy.

The second consideration arose from the Italian Empire as it was expanded by the addition of Abyssinia in 1936. The church had given the Italian government active support in its war effort, believing that it would be given as privileged a role in the empire as it held in Italy proper and, thus, that its missionary work would serve as a fitting complement to the "civilizing mission" of the Italians in East Africa. Yet rather than promoting Catholicism as the state religion in the empire, the Italians adopted instead a policy of religious toleration, with the result that the Catholic church had to build its ecclesiastical hierarchy in the empire and conduct its missionary work there with little support or encouragement from Italian colonial authorities. The church felt that they had been betrayed.

It was the publication of the Fascist party's manifesto on racial purity in July 1938 and the subsequent anti-Semitic legislation that elicited an active denunciation from the pope and the Italian hierarchy such that the church would henceforth adopt a position of studied neutrality in relation to Italian Fascism. The *Conciliazione* of 1929 had run its course. The racial issue was important because it evoked the two major dissatisfactions of the church. Firstly, it was obvious that Fascist racial policy represented a deliberate aping of Nazi racial policy and served as a gauge of Italian subservience to Germany. Secondly, the racial policy gave public justification to that primitive form of racial *apartheid* which, Denis Mack Smith has pointed out, Italy had instituted as imperial policy in 1936.<sup>2</sup> By acknowledging racial, cultural and religious diversity in the empire, the Italian government had diverted the Catholic church from its goal of religious uniformity in East Africa.

---

1. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936* (Turin, 1974).

2. Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York, 1976), pp. 122-3.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

This paper is designed as a study of the way in which the definition of a religious policy in Italian East Africa had this detrimental effect on relations between the Italian government and the Roman Catholic church and tends to bear out the contention of MacGregor Knox that Mussolini viewed success in the Ethiopian war as a means of liberating himself from his dependence on the support of traditional Italian institutions such as the Catholic church.<sup>3</sup>

Viewed from one perspective, the Italo-Abyssinian War of 1935-36 was a religious conflict. Standing firm in support of the Duce's war effort, the Roman Catholic church in Italy, but not necessarily the prelates in the Vatican, looked on the war alternately as an assertion of Italy's just claims for expansion and as a crusade to extend Catholic Christendom in the Horn of Africa. In early January 1936, the cardinal archbishop of Palermo spoke of how Providence had made Italy Queen of the Mediterranean "in order that she might the more easily diffuse abroad the benefits of Christian civilization of which Rome was the trustee."<sup>4</sup> In this war effort, the church was at one with the state in Italy.

Ranged in support of the Abyssinians were to be found the monophysite Coptic Christians who supported their coreligionist Haile Selassie, along with those Catholic and Protestant missionaries whose work in Abyssinia had been encouraged by the emperor. As the emperor had received diplomatic support from Great Britain and the League of Nations, so a chorus of bishops of the Church of England had voiced their opposition to the Italian war of aggression. The hierarchy of Italian Catholicism had responded in kind.

The Holy See, unlike the Italian Catholics, was much less enthusiastic about the war. In all possible ways, the Vatican sought an end to the hostilities and strongly supported the abortive Hoare-Laval plan for this purpose. The pope was reported as being in "a constant state of anxiety," both because he could see no end to the conflict and because "of the deplorable effect it was having on Catholic missionary endeavour."<sup>5</sup>

The war created particular hardships for Catholic missionaries in Abyssinia who found themselves being forced to take sides in the conflict. With the outbreak of the war in October 1935, the Abyssinians expelled Italian nursing sisters and missionary doctors of the Consolata mission from Addis Ababa,<sup>6</sup> and, at the end of the year, Italian-speaking Maltese of the Gig-Giga mission were deported on suspicion of being Italian spies.<sup>7</sup> Other Catholic missionaries were to be found on the Abyssinian side, most

---

3. MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. (March 1984), pp.

4. London. Public Record Office (PRO). Documents of the British Foreign Office (FO). J429/180/1, Montgomery to Eden, 10 January 1936.

5. PRO, FO, J180/180/1, Montgomery to Eden, 3 January 1936.

6. Rome. Archivio Storico. Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE). busta 26, Santa Sede (SS) 15-Etiopia, Sbrana to Mussolini, 7 October 1936.

7. ASMAE, busta 139, Etiopia fondo di guerra (EFG) 54/4, Liberati to the high commissioner, 16 March 1936.

notably the bishop of Harrar and vicar apostolic of Galla, Monsignor Jarousseau. Jarousseau had for over fifty years been a missionary in Abyssinia and had, at one time, taught Haile Selassie. Because of his close relationship with the emperor, Jarousseau was active in encouraging French military advisors to assist the Abyssinians. On 24 January 1936, he published an article in the French Catholic paper *La Croix* giving strong support to Haile Selassie, Abyssinia and the League of Nations;<sup>8</sup> this prompted Italian complaints to the Vatican and a call for the replacement of non-Italian missionaries in the war zones.<sup>9</sup> Once the war had officially come to an end in May 1936, the Italian government had to face the question of which religious policy was to be followed in Italian East Africa. The basic question was whether the Lateran Agreements would be extended to the empire with their proviso that "the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Religion is the sole religion of the State."<sup>10</sup> If not, then a policy of religious toleration would have to be implemented and the question would arise over which sects would be tolerated. Would the Coptic Christians and the Protestant missionaries who had supported Haile Selassie be permitted to continue in operation? What of the French Catholic missionaries who had opposed the Italian invasion? Would they be excluded on the basis of nationality, if not of religion?

From the beginning, the Italians decided against the application of the Lateran Agreements in the Empire in favour of religious tolerance — Moslems, Coptic Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants could continue to practise and proselytize in the Empire. Only those individual churchmen who had given active support to Haile Selassie during the war would have to pay the penalty as would those who refused to accept Italian rule.

The policy of religious tolerance was defined and applied in the first instance by Alessandro Lessona who became minister of colonies in June 1936, and by Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani. The policy was one based on the establishment of Italian control in the colony through indirect rule of the native peoples through their local chiefs. Strict social and cultural separation of the native peoples from their European conquerors was to be practised and, wherever possible, the Italians were to work through local indigenous institutional structures.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was particularly important that the Italians respect existing religions and religious practice in East Africa and not be seen to be forcing their own brand of Christianity on the natives. This was especially true in the case of the Moslems. Discriminated against by the former Coptic rulers of Ethiopia, the Moslem population had given the new Italian conquerors unconditional help and remained loyal to the Italian administration to the end. In return, Italian policy consistently favoured the practice of Islam. The only real qualification was that the toleration of the Moslems must

8. ASMAE, busta 30, SS-Etiopia, Mussolini to the Holy See, 21 February 1936 and minute, 12 March 1936; *ibid.*, busta 139, EFG 54/4, Dequier to consul, 31 March 1936.

9. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Mussolini to Holy See, 5 February 1936 and Mussolini to Holy See, 21 February 1936.

10. Article I, Treaty between the Holy See and Italy, 11 February 1929.

11. Alberto Sbacchi, "Italian Colonialism in Ethiopia, 1936-1940," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1975, pp. 227-64.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

never be at the expense of the Christians.<sup>12</sup> The support of Islam was necessary for Italian imperial control, both in Italian East Africa and in Libya, and it also offered diplomatic and political advantages to Mussolini in the Middle East when he appeared as the friend of Islam — graphically demonstrated during Mussolini's 1937 tour of Libya when he literally took up the "Sword of Islam."<sup>13</sup>

A different perspective was held by the foreign ministry who worked most closely with the Vatican and who saw the possibilities of developing a network of Italian clergy throughout the Middle East to serve the interests of the Italian state. The proposals were framed by Count Pignatti, the Italian ambassador to the Holy See, who sought in vain to interest Mussolini in his ideas. In the spring of 1936, Pignatti was aware that the Congregation of the Oriental Church was already laying plans to extend Catholic influence in Eritrea and Abyssinia by restoring an indigenous Catholic monasticism to the area. Monastic candidates from Eritrea had been educated in Italy by the Cistercians of Casamari since 1930 and, in 1936, plans were being made to establish a monastery in either Abyssinia or Eritrea. In this way, the Holy See hoped to attract Coptic Christians into union with Rome.<sup>14</sup> Pignatti was also struck by the way in which French ecclesiastical diplomats and French religious orders seemed to get the best Vatican appointments in spite of the Lateran Agreements.<sup>15</sup> He accordingly argued that Italy, with the expansion of her territory in Africa, should encourage and subsidize the work of Catholic missionary orders so that her own position throughout the Near East could thereby be enhanced. The Catholic church, he believed, should be cultivated as an agency of Italian interests.<sup>16</sup>

The policy of religious toleration was confirmed in June 1936 with the establishment of the boundaries and constitutional structure of Italian East Africa. By the end of June, the Vatican had been asked to bring its administrative boundaries into line with the new boundaries of Eritrea, Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia, as well as to effect certain personnel changes.<sup>17</sup> In July, Marshal Graziani met with Moslem and Coptic church leaders to assure them that "Italy will respect in this country all religions and beliefs as is customary by the great civilized peoples of the world."<sup>18</sup> Certain Protestant missions also received "very satisfactory assurances" from Graziani during that month.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, the Italian treatment of the Moslems had the greatest significance, since the Moslems, found primarily in the province of Harrar to the east of Addis Ababa, had occupied an inferior position in relation to the Coptic Christians under Haile Selassie. Now their religion was to be accorded the respect of the imperial authorities and

12. Rome. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS) Carte Graziani, busta 30/2, minute by Lessona, 5 August 1936.

13. Sbacchi, pp. 279-84.

14. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, minute of 9 March 1936.

15. ASMAE, busta 31, SS 15-PG, Pignatti to Mussolini, 20 March 1936.

16. ASMAE, busta 31, SS 15-PG, Pignatti to Suvich, 2 April 1936.

17. ASMAE, busta 139, EFG 54/5, Ciano to Holy See, 25 June 1936.

18. PRO, FO, J6725/4321/1, Paton to Thompson, 29 July 1936.

19. PRO, FO, J6476/4321/1, telegram from Roberts, 15 July 1936.

these authorities were to provide funds to build mosques, including the great mosque in Addis Ababa, which was built "as an act of political reward for the cooperation of the Moslems in the Italo-Ethiopian War."<sup>20</sup>

Coptic Christianity, which had been the dominant religion of the Abyssinian Empire, had the most to lose politically. Located in northern Abyssinia, in the province of Amhara and in the region of Addis Ababa, the Copts were early assured of Italian respect for their religion, although they had to accept the execution of the anti-Italian Abuna Petros on 3 August 1936.<sup>21</sup> Italian policy toward the Copts was defined in Lessona's instructions to Graziani of 5 August 1936, when the latter was advised that Italy would provide the Coptic clergy with all support for the practice of their religion, so long as they accepted Italian rule. The Abuna Cyril was to receive every cordiality as well as financial assistance provided that he gave to the Italian authorities the same loyalty that he had given to Haile Selassie. Ultimately, however, the Italian goal was to separate the Abyssinian Copts from their dependence on the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria who had the authority to name the Abunas and who, it was suspected, could easily fall under British influence. Rather, the Italians wanted an autocephalous Coptic church in Abyssinia.<sup>22</sup>

Like the Copts, the Protestant missionaries were also liable to suffer the wrath of the conqueror. During the war, they had either provided active support to the Abyssinian forces by soliciting funds and support or, at best, had been unsympathetic to the war and to the Italian Catholic conquerors. It certainly did not help the cause of the Protestant missionaries when the Anglican bishop of Liverpool, on 11 May, read from his pulpit reports of Italian atrocities in Abyssinia which had reached him from Anglican missionaries there.<sup>23</sup>

The largest of the Protestant missions was the Swedish Evangelical Mission which had been in Abyssinia since 1870 and was richly funded from Sweden. As the Swedish government had also assisted Haile Selassie during the war, the Swedish missionaries were ordered out of Italian East Africa on 15 July 1936, the day that sanctions against Italy were lifted by the League of Nations.<sup>24</sup>

While the Protestant missionaries were tolerated by the Italians, they were also being carefully watched. In November of 1936, following the interception of letters from members of the Sudan Interior Mission which described Italian difficulties in Abyssinia, Graziani requisitioned the leper hospital in Addis Ababa which had been run by that mission as well as that mission's headquarters buildings in the city.<sup>25</sup> British and

20. Sbacchi, p. 284.

21. PRO, FO, J7576/3957/1, Roberts to Eden, 25 August 1936.

22. ACS, Carte Graziani, busta 30/2, minute by Lessona, 5 August 1936.

23. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Mussolini to Holy See, 15 May 1936.

24. PRO, FO, J6476/4321/1, telegram from Roberts, 15 July 1936; *ibid.*, J6646/4321/1 of 24 July 1936, minute by Thompson, 28 July 1936; *ibid.*, J7981/4321/1, memo by Matthew, 3 October 1936.

25. PRO, FO, J8849/4321/1, telegram from Roberts, 4 December 1936; ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Graziani to Lessona, 13 December 1936.



## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

American protests were advised that the missionaries had been indiscreet.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1937 Graziani expelled four members of the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society for similar political indiscretions. At the same time, the Italian censors in Naples advised Mussolini of the continuing hostile views of the representatives of the Sudan Interior Mission, with the result that the Duce sent orders to requisition their remaining mission stations and effectively to expel all the remaining representatives of that organization.<sup>27</sup> When the British Ambassador in Rome asked foreign minister Ciano to allow the Sudan Interior Mission at least to retain their headquarters building and also asked if new missionaries could be substituted for the offending representatives of the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society,<sup>28</sup> the issue of the Protestant missionaries was brought to a head. Ciano, concerned about the state of Anglo-Italian relations, urged Lessona to accept some of the British proposals, especially since these were coupled with a threat to expel Italian missionaries from the British Empire in retaliation. Lessona refused and recommended that they both present their case to Mussolini.<sup>29</sup> Mussolini not only supported Lessona's position but, being struck by Lessona's argument that foreign missionaries cannot be allowed to teach within the empire, decreed that henceforth no foreigners of any religion would be allowed to set up schools of any class within the empire. The British were advised that the missionaries could apply to carry out humanitarian or welfare work "when the question of recognition of the Empire is an accomplished fact".<sup>30</sup> At the same time, to demonstrate that this decision had been made on national rather than religious grounds, Mussolini decided in June 1937 to send Pastor Bertinatti of the Italian Protestant Waldensian church to coordinate Protestant missionary activities in the empire.<sup>31</sup>

For the Roman Catholics, Italian East Africa fell under the missionary jurisdiction of both the Congregation of the Oriental Church and the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide. The former was interested in developing churches which practised the Alexandrian rite favoured by the Coptic Christians and in using that rite as a means of returning these Christians to Roman jurisdiction. The Ethiopian College in Rome had been established for the purpose of educating native clergy in this Alexandrian rite. The Coptic Christians were located in Eritrea and in northern Abyssinia, most notably in the provinces of Amhara, Gondar and Tigre and it was here that the Congregation of the Oriental church directed the missionary work of Italian Capuchins and French Lazarists in May of 1936.

The Propaganda Fide, on the other hand, sought converts from non-Christians and was active in Italian Somaliland and Harrar province of eastern Abyssinia, both of which were fundamentally Moslem, as well as in the animist regions of the south and west. In

---

26. PRO, FO, J9167/4321/1, telegram from Roberts, 22 December 1936.

27. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Lessona to Ciano, 30 April 1937.

28. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Drummond to Ciano, 16 April 1937.

29. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Lessona to Ciano, 5 June 1937 and *ibid.*, memo for Mussolini, 5 June 1937.

30. PRO, FO, J2756/548/1, telegram from Drummond, 10 June 1937; ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Ciano to Drummond, 10 June 1937.

31. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Lessona to Ciano, 5 June 1937.

## HISTORICAL PAPERS 1984 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

May of 1936 Italian Minor Franciscans were responsible for Somaliland, the Consolata mission of Turin was in the south and west, while the French Capuchins under Monsignor Jarousseau were responsible for Addis Ababa and the east.

With incorporation of Abyssinia into Italian East Africa in June of 1936, the colonial minister wanted the boundaries of religious jurisdiction to be brought into line with the new administrative boundaries, especially those of Eritrea and Somaliland. He also sought the "nationalization" of the Catholic church in East Africa by the substitution of Italian missionaries for those of other nationalities, particularly the French. He wanted the French Capuchins to be replaced by Italian members of that order in Harrar and the Lazarists, who were predominantly French, to be replaced in Amhara by members of the Order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Verona, which was already doing extensive mission work in the Sudan. The Consolata mission, an early instigator of rebellion against Ethiopian rule and, consequently, a particular favorite of the Italian authorities,<sup>32</sup> was to have their responsibility extended to include the schools and hospitals of Addis Ababa. Finally, Lessona wanted the Belgian director of the Ethiopian College in Rome to be replaced by an Italian.<sup>33</sup>

It was a proposal to the Holy See to bring about a simple administrative reorganization which would make their boundaries and personnel more compatible with Italian rule in Abyssinia. The Italians expected an immediate response; instead they got a pontifical commission.

The Holy See was interested in more than administrative readjustments. The Catholic church in Italy had supported the national war effort, and under the Lateran Agreements, Catholicism was defined as the sole religion of Italy; it was therefore logical for the Vatican to feel that the Catholic church would play an important and active role in the diffusion of Italian culture and Italian authority in the empire.

Accordingly, the Vatican response to the Italian requests for administrative reorganization was to strike a pontifical commission to examine the entire situation of the church in Abyssinia. The membership of this commission, which met for the first time on 28 June, included Cardinal Pacelli, the secretary of state, Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, the prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide and Cardinal Tisserant, the prefect of the Congregation of the Oriental Church, along with their undersecretaries.<sup>34</sup>

The Pope refused to countenance the replacement of the Belgian head of the Ethiopian College<sup>35</sup> but he was otherwise willing to accept Italian requests for the substitution of Italian missionaries for French. By August, the commission had ordered that French Lazarists be replaced by Italian Lazarists and also by members of the Order

32. Sbacchi, p. 266.

33. ASMAE, busta 139, EFG 54/5, Lessona to Mussolini, 8 June 1936.

34. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Pignatti to Ciano, 24 June 1936.

35. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Pignatti to Ciano, 3 July 1936.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Verona.<sup>36</sup> The pontifical commission was also looking beyond missionary work toward the church's ministry to those Italian administrators and colonists who were expected to be sent to East Africa. In addition to the work of the missionary orders, the commission contemplated assisting in the work of colonization by providing institutions of higher education in Addis Ababa, including an agricultural school directed by the Jesuits. The Salesians and Jesuits were also seen as being assigned to minister to the Italian settlers who were expected to arrive over the next ten year period. Most importantly, the commission wanted to create a full ecclesiastical hierarchy in East Africa.<sup>37</sup>

The extensive planning evoked little enthusiasm from the Italian government, especially from the colonial ministry. Not only did that ministry intend to restrict colonization to military settlers for some years,<sup>38</sup> but it also did not intend to share its conquest of the empire with the Vatican by seeing an extensive ecclesiastical establishment transferred to East Africa. The colonial ministry wanted changes from the Vatican that were cosmetic, not structural. They half-heartedly agreed to accept the Salesians and the Jesuits but pointed out that they felt the proposed institutions of higher education were premature.<sup>39</sup> They also discouraged the need to send priests to minister to Italian colonists, suggesting that, for the foreseeable future, the military chaplains in Abyssinia would be sufficient for the task.<sup>40</sup>

Because the pontifical commission was making little headway in negotiating through diplomatic channels, they decided to circumvent these channels by sending an apostolic visitor to Abyssinia who could examine the situation there and negotiate directly with the colonial officials. Early in September of 1936, the pope sent Monsignor Giovanni Castellani, the archbishop of Rhodes, as apostolic visitor to Abyssinia on a mission both to negotiate a new institutional structure and to convince the Fascists that the Catholic church would give enthusiastic support to the Italian colonial mission.

The tone was set on Castellani's arrival in Addis Ababa on 13 October, when he gave the Fascist salute to the welcoming guard of honour<sup>41</sup> and, when he celebrated a pontifical mass on 26 October, he saluted Italy as "the country destined by God to make civilization and the glory of the Church even greater in the world." He also gave thanks to "the magnificent work of Mussolini, who combines the calmest balance with the daring of a hero" in ensuring that "it will be the Roman Empire which will carry the cross of Christ into the world."<sup>42</sup>

At the same time Cardinal Tisserant gave an interview to the *Gazetta del Popolo* in

---

36. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Villa Pietro to Pignatti, 18 August 1936 and *ibid.*, Scognamiglio to Pignatti, 21 August 1936.

37. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Pignatti to Ciano, 3 July 1936.

38. ACS, Carte Graziani, busta 30/2, minute by Lessona, 5 August 1936; Sbacchi, pp. 407-29.

39. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Ciano to Pignatti, 3 August 1936.

40. ASMAE, busta 30, SS 5-Etiopia, Ciano to Holy See, 29 August 1936.

41. PRO, FO, J8531/3957/1, Roberts to Eden, 27 October 1936.

42. PRO, FO, J8291/4321/1, Mallet to Eden, 28 October 1936.

which he discussed the plans and future activities of the Holy See in Abyssinia. He pointed out that the conquest of the empire opened "a vast field ... to Catholic Missions whose work has hitherto been hampered in Abyssinia by the unyielding opposition of the 'Monophysite' clergy — wrongly known as 'Coptic'.... The possibilities of already existing missions will be increased" and "new centres of evangelisation" will be created. "The work of the Catholic missionary," the cardinal asserted, "will nobly go hand in hand with the civilizing actions which Italy, under the Fascist Government, had already begun in order to restore to the people the civilization of Rome and, with it, social well-being."<sup>43</sup>

Once in Abyssinia, Castellani was able to make and recommend immediate changes of missionary personnel to suit the wishes of the Italian authorities, as well as to enter into direct negotiations with officials in the colony.<sup>44</sup> By the time that he returned to Rome in January of 1937, he had secured the agreement of the colonial ministry to the creation of a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy in Italian East Africa under an apostolic delegate to be located in Addis Ababa.<sup>45</sup> When the pope, in February 1937, recognized Victor Emmanuel III as "King of Italy and Emperor of Abyssinia,"<sup>46</sup> the stage was set for the meeting of the pontifical commission which formulated the papal decrees on the new order in Abyssinia.<sup>47</sup>

By these decrees, of 11 March 1937, an ecclesiastical hierarchy was created for Italian East Africa. Four apostolic prefectures were defined for northern Abyssinia, while apostolic vicariates were recognized for Eritrea, Mogadishu (Italian Somaliland) and, in Abyssinia, Addis Ababa, Gimma, Neghelli and Harrar. The apostolic delegate, who was always to be an archbishop, would also act as vicar apostolic of Addis Ababa; under his authority were to be the other vicars apostolic, all of whom would be bishops, and the prefects apostolic. Monsignor Castellani was named to the post of apostolic delegate. Each prefecture and vicariate was assigned as the responsibility of a particular Italian religious order or orders, with the exception of Addis Ababa which was also to be assigned to members of the secular clergy.<sup>48</sup>

While the Italians might carp over the details of the Vatican decrees, they were satisfied that their wishes had generally been met, especially in terms of replacing non-Italian clergy.<sup>49</sup> Once the Vatican had satisfied them on this point, the Italian government could expel the remaining English Protestant missionaries and Mussolini could decree in June of 1937 that henceforth no foreigners of any religion would be allowed to set up schools of any class within the empire.<sup>50</sup>

43. Ibid.

44. ASMAE, busta 139, EFG 54/4, Pignatti to Ciano, 23 November 1936.

45. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 5, Ciano to Lessona, 30 January 1937.

46. PRO, FO, R1427/135/22, 25 February 1937.

47. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 5, Pignatti to Ciano, 15 March 1937.

48. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 5, summary of pontifical discussions, 25 March 1937; *ibid.*, busta 381, SS 5-Etiopia Italiana (1938), Ciano to minister of Italian Africa, 22 April 1937.

49. ASMAE, busta 174, EFG 1, Ciano to minister of Italian Africa, 28 July 1937.

50. PRO, FO, J2756/548/1, telegram from Drummond, 10 June 1937; ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Ciano to Drummond, 10 June 1937.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE ITALIAN EMPIRE

Yet, having allowed the Vatican to create a centralized administrative structure in the Empire, the Italian government sought to limit its power and to exercise some control over it, lest it assume the same domestic authority in East Africa that it had in Italy proper. The expulsion of British missionaries brought the British colonial office to respond by expelling Italian missionaries from the British Empire, most notably from the Sudan. The Holy See was most perturbed at the implications of such a policy and asked the Italian government to modify their policies lest the interests of the Vatican be permanently damaged.<sup>51</sup> The Italian government, pleased to see the Vatican in difficulty with the British authorities and thus more dependent on Italian goodwill, encouraged them to resist and delay compliance with British requests as long as possible.<sup>52</sup>

So that the Holy See should have no illusions about Catholicism being the official religion of the empire, Mussolini despatched Pastor Bertinatti of the Protestant Waldensian church to Abyssinia once the British had been expelled, with instructions to coordinate Protestant missionary activities in the empire.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in September of 1937, Graziani assured Coptic church dignitaries that "the Coptic religion, in accordance with the definite wish of the Great Duce Benito Mussolini, is the official religion of the Empire."<sup>54</sup> The Vatican was annoyed and refused to allow the Italian government any say over the appointment of the vicars and prefects apostolic.<sup>55</sup> By the end of 1937, they were extremely bitter about Italy's pro-Moslem policy in Abyssinia where, according to one Vatican official, "they were spending thousands on building mosques ... and were content that the Christian churches should be miserable shacks." The Holy See was incensed at this favouring of the Moslems since "all over Africa the Moslems were the great problem from the missionary point of view."<sup>56</sup>

It was the conflict between the Italian government and the Catholic church over their dealings with the Coptic Christians that brought matters to a head. The Italians wanted the Abyssinian Copts to establish an autocephalous church, separate from the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. When the Abuna Cyril refused to separate, he was deposed by Graziani, to be replaced at the end of 1937 by the Abuna Abraham as head of the new autocephalous Church of Abyssinia.<sup>57</sup> The Catholics, on the other hand, wanted the Copts not only to separate from Alexandria but also to submit to the ecclesiastical authority of the Bishop of Rome.

As apostolic delegate, Castellani made this one of his priorities and, in the summer of 1938, he arranged for the Coptic Abuna Johannes to visit Rome where a papal audience was planned for him. The Italian colonial authorities were furious when they

---

51. ASMAE, busta 159, EFG 7, Pignatti to Ciano, 1 July 1937.

52. ASMAE, busta 39, SS 5-Sudan, Pignatti to Ciano, 21 June 1938.

53. PRO, FO, J4120/548/1, Paton to Campbell, 28 September 1937.

54. PRO, FO, J4228/548/1, telegram from acting consul-general in Addis Ababa, 27 September 1937.

55. ASMAE, busta 38, SS 5-Etiopia Italiana (1938), Ciano to minister of Italian Africa, 16 November 1937.

56. PRO, FO, R8779/368/22, Osborne to Nichols, 24 December 1937.

57. D.A. Binchy, *Church and State in Fascist Italy* (London, 1941), p. 361.

## HISTORICAL PAPERS 1984 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

learned of this, fearing that the Copts would believe that they had supported the plan to bring the Copts into the Catholic church. Apprehensive lest Castellani's enthusiasm should alienate the Copts, the Italians advised the Vatican that Castellani would have to be replaced as apostolic delegate to demonstrate Italian disapproval of his activities.<sup>58</sup> On 26 July, eleven days after the publication of the Fascist party's manifesto on racial purity, the Italian ambassador was received by the pope at his summer residence in order to discuss the demand for Castellani's replacement. Pius XI objected to the racial policy both in terms of its imitation of the Nazis and in terms of its application in the Italian Empire. The demand for the removal of Castellani was a result of this application, leading the pope to lament that all other religions, even the Moslems, were better protected in Italian East Africa than was the Catholic church, and the Waldensians, potential agents for the Protestant English, were being given far too much help.<sup>59</sup> As the pope refused to concede on Castellani, the Italians allowed him to remain in Abyssinia on condition that his policies conform with those of the Italian administration.<sup>60</sup>

It was against this colonial background that Pius XI launched his attack on Italian racial legislation in 1938 and, thereby, discontinued active Catholic support for the Fascist regime. In terms of colonial policy, Italian racism meant that the Europeans and the native peoples in East Africa were to be consigned to a social and cultural *apartheid* in which the indigenous religions of the Africans were to be encouraged and tolerated at the expense of Roman Catholicism. In the colonial setting, racism implied religious toleration and, thus, was anathema to the Catholic church.

---

58. ASMAE, busta 44, SS 6-5 (1939), Ciano to Holy See, 15 July 1938 and *ibid.*, Teruzzi to Ciano, 6 August 1938.

59. ASMAE, busta 44, SS 6-5 (1939), Ciano to minister of Italian Africa, 26 July 1938; *ibid.*, busta 39, SS 5-Germania, Pignatti to Ciano, 26 July 1938.

60. ASMAE, busta 44, SS 6-5 (1939), Pignatti to Ciano, 10 August 1938.